

Conflict between the Individual and Society in *The Scarlet Letter*

Leema Sen Gupta

Lecturer, Access Academy, Asian University for Women, Chittagong

Abstract

The Scarlet Letter can be considered a story of never-ending conflict between the individual and society. Here individuality is being downtrodden by the society in the name of Puritanism where religion and law are identical to one another. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl are struggling to find their identities against the harsh Puritan society. The aim of this paper is to show how hypocritical the Puritan society is in applying their ethics when they themselves do not follow it and how the instinctive nature of the soul of the individual has been shattered by the iron grasp of Puritanism. This paper is also an attempt to show that, in spite of all the efforts of the Puritan society, individuals find a way to uphold their mental freedom and thus defeat the society.

Does the individual truly exist, or is he just a raw product of his society? Some thinkers believe that the individual is a rational creature, who can live fairly independently from the impact of society, while others would argue that humans are mere pawns who are under the constant impact of societal forces that appear incomprehensible to them. The only part of this dilemma that is certain is that these questions were well debated in the past, and will continue to be analyzed for many years to come. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne engages in a fascinating analysis of the relationship between the individual and the pressure society exerts, revealing that, while society bears heavily on the individual, the individual can work to change society in such a way that the initial influence of society is marginalized (“Classic Network” 1).

Set in the harsh Puritan community of 17th century Boston, *The Scarlet Letter*, the tale of an adulterous entanglement that results in an illegitimate birth, reveals Nathaniel Hawthorne’s concerns about the conflict between society and the private self. *The Scarlet Letter* turns upon two deep-seated, fundamental struggles—that between natural impulse and conscience, and that between the individual and the restraints of society. In the iron cage of Puritanism, people were regarded as incurably corrupt and infractions of social code were avenged by barbarous punishments. People living in that Puritanic society found themselves caught in moral mazes when certain well established laws were broken. Socially disgraced and ostracized Hester Prynne draws on her inner strength and certainty of spirit to emerge as the first true heroine of American fiction. Arthur Dimmesdale stands as a classic study of a self-divided individual, trapped by the rules of society.

Hester Prynne, the young protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter*, can be analyzed as a Transcendentalist heroine and her conflicts with the society be seen as the confrontation of a socially constructed identity with an individual identity. Various symbols and literary devices are used to depict this struggle against a socially determined identity. In this novel, the night and the wilderness create opportunities for the manifestation of individual identity while the day and the city are the oppressive settings of social identity. Even the prison was immediately juxtaposed with

the imagery of a garden to impose a critical atmosphere upon the work. Hester is a modern character who stumbles between vice and virtue, and struggles for individualism and personal identity. According to Michael Bell, "Behind the mask of 'acquired wisdom,' Hester has been nurturing her 'instinct,' nurturing a thoroughly subversive sense of her individuality" (51). She succeeds in keeping her individual identity to a degree that the scarlet letter of shame that has been imposed upon her by society loses its signification and becomes a symbol of fame, respect and even power (Mehran 1)

In *The Scarlet Letter*, society punishes individuals in the name of Puritanism which eventually results in a conflict between the individual and Puritanism. *The Scarlet Letter* can also be considered as a study of the hypocrisy of Puritan society. Throughout the novel we see how the leaders of that society themselves deviate from the values they are supposed to uphold. They have excommunicated Hester for her adulterous act but they do not hesitate to accept the services of Hester who has been branded as a sinner:

Vanity, it may be, chose to mortify itself, by putting on, for ceremonials of pomp and state, the garments that had been wrought by her sinful hands. Her needlework was seen on the ruff of the governor; military men wore it on their scarf, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby's little cap; it was shut up, to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead. But it is not recorded that, in a single instance, her skill was called in aid to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride. (Hawthorne 75)

We can even see the hypocrisy of Puritan society in the description of the Governor's dwellings. It has been described as "Aladin's Palace" by Hawthorne himself:

This was a large wooden house, built in a fashion of which there are specimens still extant in the streets of our elder towns; now moss-grown, crumbling of decay, and melancholy at heart with the many sorrowful or joyful occurrences, remembered or forgotten, that have happened, and passed away, within their dusky chambers. (91)

Through the word "moss-grown," Hawthorne wants to convey the message that Puritan society's humanity has become mossy and devoid of warmth or love. Puritan society was established on the basis of a belief that people will lead a life without availing luxury and entertainment. But the sparkling and gorgeous decoration of the palace represents the leaders' attitude to life that contradict the very values they are supposed to uphold.

Puritanism is also present in the story in various forms. Hawthorne depicts the inner picture of Puritan society and indirectly criticizes the interior hypocrisy in Puritan collective society that "fails to recognize the intention or meaning of the sensuous element in human nature" (Culacurcio 10). Almost all the characters in the story, except Pearl, have something to hide. The eyes of the Puritan fathers are closed to their own sins and ignorance although they are so strict about those of others. The personality of Dimmesdale, among many other things, is the depiction of the internal deficiency of the Puritan system. While he is painfully struggling with his conscience, he has no problem with attending church ceremonies and delivering

vehement sermons: “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which maybe the true” (Bell 216). Yet it can be inferred that the pain of Dimmesdale has its roots in his uncorrupted soul and conscience rather than his Christian and Puritan education and this adds another aspect to the general critical tone of the work towards Puritanism (Mehran 1).

For centuries, the devoted Catholic has made it a part of his creed to cast disgrace upon human wishes and desire which is not framed by society, and the cold and rigid Puritan with less fervor and consequently, with less beauty, had driven all those wishes and desires as the parents of all sin. When Hester and Dimmesdale responded to a natural passion, the Puritan society labelled their passion as “adultery” and punished Hester. Her punishment illustrates the law’s brutality as it makes no connection with the soul.

Hester and Dimmesdale, in committing adultery, have responded to a natural urge and are therefore not guilty in any absolute sense. Dimmesdale responds to his feelings for Hester and as Hester believes she is a widow, she never thinks her relationship with Dimmesdale is adultery. It is society, who by punishing them, has sinned against them. Man is inherently good but social conventions and attitudes which thwart the promptings of nature are not acceptable. The natural good in Hester and Dimmesdale deteriorates because of the sense of sin which society forces upon them.

Hawthorne’s capacity to read and analyze the mind of a character may first be studied with reference to Hester Prynne. When Hester stands on the scaffold facing the multitudes of citizens, she has a “burning blush and yet a haughty smile” (Hawthorne 50) on her face. The burning blush reveals the sense of shame caused by the public exposure, while the haughty smile shows her defiance of society’s moral code. She typifies romantic individualism which repudiates the doctrine of a supernatural ethical absolute. Hester, violating piety and decorum, lived a life of nature and attempted to rationalize her romantic self-indulgence. Since her love for Dimmesdale is the one sincere passion of her life, she obeys it utterly, though a conventional Puritan judgment would have said that she is stepping out of the moral order. Hawthorne particularly shows the futility of Puritan society’s judgment:

How strange, indeed! Man has marked this woman’s sin by a scarlet letter, which had such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her, save it were sinful like herself. God as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished had given her a lovely child, whose place was on that same dishonored bosom, to connect her parent for ever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven. (Hawthorne 80)

In Puritan society, religion and law were almost identical and in such a society, going against the grain meant going against the Bible. According to Biblical law, adultery is a serious crime that should be punished with death (Leviticus 20:10). Society has punished Hester by declaring that she will wear throughout her life a scarlet letter “A” on the bosom of her gown. This is the stigma that Hester has to carry always. Puritan leaders declared that they were merciful as the death sentence had not been imposed considering her age and condition. But they failed to

see the everlasting pang of the token of shame that she is going to wear.

But the irony is that the scarlet letter has failed to create the desired impact on Hester. She does not consider her adulterous action to be a serious sin. She does not experience any sense of guilt even after society has pronounced its judgment upon her. She believes in the sanctity of the human heart, her love towards Dimmesdale. "What we did," she says to Dimmesdale in the forest "had consecration of its own. We felt it so; we said so to each other" (Hawthorne, 170). For Hester, the letter "A" does not reveal adultery, it only stands for "Arthur." When she is given the choice to disclose the name of her fellow sinner and get rid of that shameful token, she cries: "Never! It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony as well as mine" (Hawthorne 63).

That is her rebellion against society. Society gives her the title of a "sinner" for her love but she accepts her love as her "life-blood." The name of her lover is so deeply engraved in her mind that nobody can take it away from her.

Hester's punishment does not end in the scaffold. Her freedom is completely violated at every step of her life. In all her intercourse with society there is nothing that can make her feel that she belongs to that society. The clergyman paused in the street to address words of advice which brought a crowd around her. She often finds herself as the subject matter of the discourse when she enters a church. When a newcomer comes to the region and looks with inquisitive eyes at the letter "A," she feels the pain of the letter upon her bosom afresh. She never becomes used to the letter. On the contrary, it grows more sensitive with daily torture.

In spite of all the torture and mental agony, Puritan society fails to make her repent for adultery. On the contrary, Hester, through her charity, starts to win the hearts of the common people. At times of general or individual sorrow, she responds warmly and becomes a "Sister of Mercy." She proves herself so helpful to the people of the Puritan society that the letter "A" on her bosom comes to have a different meaning from its original signification. It now seems to stand for "Able."

She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester with a woman's strength. (Hawthorne 141)

Puritans in their private lives have denied calling Hester a "sinner" for her adulterous action. They respond to Hester's natural urge as human beings, not merely as Puritans. Slowly, therefore, by meek submission and unselfish kindness she wins back the respect of even the most rigid Puritans. Strong, passionate and richly pagan, Hester submits to Puritan society but never repents. The author says, "The scarlet letter had not done its office" (Hawthorne 145). After seven years she is ready to run away with Dimmesdale. The consequences of the scarlet letter as penance are thus just the reverse of what the Puritan community intended. A sin of

passion now develops into a sin of purpose. Hester is the one who dares trust herself to believe in the possibility of a new morality in the new world. She achieved mental emancipation in spite of having her own human weakness, in spite of the prejudice of Puritan society. In the forest, she even shows the courage and mental strength to support Dimmesdale to draw him to a new life. She believes in her soul and her individuality, no matter what the society demands:

... you have deeply and sorely repented. Your sin is left behind you, in the days long past. Your present life is not less holy, in very truth, than it seems in people's eyes. Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works? And wherefore should it not bring you peace? (Hawthorne 167)

In the forest, Hester does not bother to throw away the token of shame from her bosom. She could do so because she never believes that the letter 'A' on her bosom is the symbol of her sin. She can light the heart of Dimmesdale with a new hope, a new dream to unite again with her.

The guilt and punishment that Hester Prynne's society imposes on her for her sin is considered to be too much by Hawthorne, and his most emotional criticism of Hester's over-reaching punishment is presented when Hester's donations of high quality clothes to the poor are rebuffed with rudeness and spite: "Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, and who not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them" (Hawthorne 75).

These harsh initial reactions toward Hester motivates her greatly and serves as an important reminder of the reforms she needs to instill in her society. The impractical, prejudicial, and disrespect towards a person like Hester infuriates Hawthorne, which is evident through the narrator's denunciation of Puritan society's strict, distasteful, absolute, and constant punishment of Hester's personal sin:

Dames of elevated rank, likewise, whose doors she entered in the way of her occupation, were accustomed to distil drops of bitterness into her heart; sometimes through that alchemy of quiet malice, by which women can concoct a subtle poison from ordinary trifles. (Hawthorne 76)

Hawthorne's focus is not on the innate character of Hester, but more on the societal forces that govern her. The readers have very limited knowledge of Hester's character before she committed adultery. Hawthorne only hints and lets the readers assume about Hester's past. He tells the reader that Hester married Roger Chillingworth without loving him, and he hints that before her marriage Hester was an impulsive young woman who had to be constrained by her loving parents. Her refusal to name her fellow sinner also demonstrates remnants of Hester's partially stubborn character: "'I will not speak!' answered Hester, turning pale as death" (Hawthorne 63).

For Dimmesdale, the reverse is the case. His punishment comes purely from within. Society does not punish him because society does not know of the sin that he has committed. He is

a greater sinner than Hester because besides the sin of adultery, he has committed the sin of concealment or hypocrisy. He is oppressed by the weight of his crime but lacks the courage to make a public confession of his guilt. He lacked the courage seven years before to stand beside Hester and Pearl on the scaffold. During the seven long years his guilt has been secretly gnawing at his breast. He believes that he is an utter pollution. Sometimes he even admits his sin openly. But he admits it in such superfluous and flowery words that again and again he falls into his own trap. People come to accept him as "The saint on earth" (Hawthorne 126). The more people revere him, the more he feels the throb of pain and anguish in his heart. He hallucinates, sometimes seeing a herd of diabolic shapes and sometimes a group of angels. Constantly sacrificing honesty to respectability, Dimmesdale is gradually broken down and brought to the verge of insanity. One night he even mounts the scaffold as an act of expiation.

His repentance emanates from sorrow of sin and grows out of fear of consequence, but we also learn that his enlightened conscience, rising above the dogmas and catechistic norms of those times, teaches him what obligation has gathered around him. He discovers himself as viler than the vilest sinner. But the fear of losing his name and fame in society chains him so tightly that he cannot respond to his natural urge. Puritan society has made him a puppet, a slave to the hollow rules which destroys his individual spirit. He cannot look directly at anybody or even at any inanimate object out of the fear that people can read what is in his heart. To conceal his sin he always keeps his hands over his heart because the acute pain of sin has formed the letter "A" on the flesh of his breast.

However, Dimmesdale is also a character who symbolically shows his rejection of Puritanical codes and becomes the representative of a self-sufficient individual by responding to the true feeling that arises between him and Hester. His rejection of Puritanical codes and the desire to embrace reality is clear when he rejects Hester's offer of escape and instead reveals his true self by approaching the scaffold on Election Day. Dimmesdale's change of mind is the hatred he shows towards Puritanism. This is obvious when he says to Hester on the scaffold: "Thanks be to Him who hath led me hither!" (Hawthorne 220). This shows Dimmesdale's eagerness to reveal the truth and the reality of his innermost powerful feelings. As a matter of fact, it has been a long time since Dimmesdale had wanted to stand against the Puritanical codes and defy man-made laws: "I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown myself to mankind as they will see me at the judgment-seat" (Hawthorne 192).

Another example of the conflict between the individual and society is to be found in the delineation of Pearl. Pearl has been victimized by the extreme code of Puritan society. She is not directly involved in adultery but society treats her as its product. Her own self is very trivial to society. Without committing any crime she has to suffer for her parents' adultery. Society does not see her apart from her parents' crime. As a result some kinds of abnormality grow within her. She is not amenable to any rules and disciplines. She is an impatient, wayward, and rebellious child. There is something perverse in her character which alienates her from other children. Hawthorne portrays her character as a "born outcast of the infantile world".

In giving her existence, a great law had been broken; and the result was a being, whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder; or with an order peculiar to themselves, amidst which the point of variety and arrangement was difficult or impossible to be discovered. (Hawthorne 81)

In this novel Pearl acts as an unconscious agent of Puritan society. She keeps her mother's torture fresh through her childlike questions and games. She never lets her mother forget her adulterous past. Hawthorne shows Pearl's treatment of her mother as a representative of Puritan society through Hester's speech: "She is my happiness!— she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too!"(Hawthorne 108).

Pearl first questions the minister's habit of keeping his hand on his heart. She also notices the relationship between her mother's shameful token and the minister's habit. Hawthorne creates Pearl as society's weapon to keep her parents' suffering everlasting. Pearl pressurizes her father to confess his guilt several times and to give her recognition as a daughter which keeps Dimmesdale's tortured conscience trembling: "Doth he love us? Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town?" (Hawthorne 185). Each time with a shattered voice Dimmesdale refuses to keep his promise.

Pearl's attitude towards her mother is always a strange mixture of love and torture:

... by a kind of necessity that always impelled the child to alloy whatever comfort she might chance to give with a throb of anguish—Pearl put up her mouth, and kissed the scarlet letter too.

"That was not kind!" said Hester. "When thou hast shown me a little love, thou mockest me!" (Hawthorne 185)

Like her parents, Pearl also wants her identity in society as an individual and not just as an outcome of adulterous action. She even denies accepting herself as an embodiment of the shameful symbolic letter "A". In the forest she identifies herself as an independent being, apart from her mother's sin:

... the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom. Now, see! There it is, playing, a good way off. Stand you here, and let me run and catch it. I am but a child. It will not flee from me; for I wear nothing on my bosom yet. (Hawthorne 160)

In the chapter "The New England Holiday," Pearl reacts when she finds that the old jailor denies her individuality by associating her with letter "A": "'He should not nod and smile at me, for all that,—the black, grim, ugly-eyed old man!' said Pearl. 'He may nod at thee if he will; for thou art clad in gray, and wearest the scarlet letter'" (Hawthorne 199).

Throughout the novel, Pearl wants to make her own identity regardless of her parents. She only accepts Dimmesdale as her father at the end of the novel when he discloses the truth about her birth. She never accepts her existence only as a mere outcome of adulterous action which is what society wants. Rather, at the end of the novel we see her as an independent individual living a happy life.

Throughout the novel we see that Hawthorne is very sympathetic towards Hester, Arthur and Pearl. He believes that if Hester has sinned, she has done so as an affirmation of life. Her sin is the source of her life; she stands for those rights of personality that society is inclined to trample upon. The conflict in the novel is central because it is total. Hester Prynne has been wounded by an unfriendly world, but the society facing her is invested by Hawthorne with assurance and authority. Its opposition is defensible and even valid.

Puritan society, trying its level best to make its members conform, has failed. At the end of the novel Arthur Dimmesdale shows the courage of throwing away the garment of mock holiness. He does not flee with Hester to another region to live a comfortable life. On the contrary, he earns his mental freedom by paying with his own life. He can free himself from the iron grip of Puritan society. Pearl also makes herself free from the token of shame. The moment her father confesses his relation with Hester, she gets her new identity. She eventually finds a home for herself. As for Hester, she finds her real life in New England. She assures other women who are wounded, wasted or wronged by society:

She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. (Hawthorne 227)

At the end, we see that the characters who are the victims of society do penitence in their own way, not according to social prescription. They are obligated to their own souls and refuse to be dictated by the prevailing social values and dogmas.

Works Cited

- Bell, Michael Davitt. "Arts of Deception: Hawthorne, Romance and *The Scarlet Letter*." *Culture, Genre, and Literary Vocation: Selected Essays on American Literature*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2001. 32-53. *Google Books*. Web. March 12, 2016.
- Colacurcio, Michael J. "Introduction: The Spirit and the Sign." *New Essays on The Scarlet Letter*. Ed. Michael Colacurcio. NY: Cambridge UP, 1985. Print.
- Doren, Mark van. *The Scarlet Letter. Hawthorne: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. A. N. Kaul. NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966. 129-141. Print
- Ghasemi, Parvin and Pyeaam Abbasi. "A Thematic Analysis of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*." *Kata*. 11.1 (2009). 1-17. Print.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. NY: Penguin Classics, 1986. Print.
- "Individual vs. Society: *The Scarlet Letter*." December 6, 2011. Web. January 24, 2016.
- Mehran. "Individual and Society in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*." January 24, 2011. Web. January 26, 2016.
- "The Individual and His Society in *The Scarlet Letter*." *Classics Network*. N.d. Web. January 24, 2016.